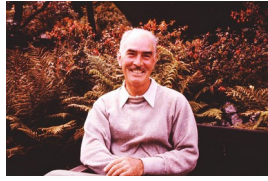


Eric Robert Shelley

Reminiscences about My Father



Introduction

This person is Eric. He is my Father. I thought you would like to hear about him because he was an outstandingly fine man. It would be no exaggeration to describe him as a fine English gentleman.

For what did he stand? He stood for truth in his own personal relationships, integrity, always reliable when problems arose, a great solver of difficulties, often some too hard for others to fathom. He had a positive and clear-headed understanding of what is required to maintain successful family values.

He had an excellent brain and could deal thoroughly with, for example, mathematical problems. He was self-taught and left school at fourteen years old. He could solve problems by logical analysis and by careful thought leading to correct solutions.

These are my own recollections of the times I had with my Father. As these are mine alone, perhaps other members of the family will not be offended if they are not mentioned here. Clearly, their own memories are equally valuable to them.

Family Man

He was a committed family man. He spent real quality time with his four children, very much on a one to one basis. I remember so vividly being carried on his broad shoulders all around the garden, learning and having new things described to me as we went along. Later on, I remember playing french cricket on the beach at Perranporth and the time when he had to make abject apologies to a seated and highly irate and elderly lady when the ball, hit so high into the sky, fell squarely on her head! He made a good job of putting that right.

Needless to say, whilst he had to be very serious himself, we were all absolutely doubled up in hysterical laughter ourselves!

He ran and cultivated a large (couple of acres) garden at Bryn Teg in which he grew his chosen varieties of potato, different greens, soft fruit bushes of many types (gooseberry bushes have such long and sharp thorns, did you know?). There were also several lawns and herbaceous borders. There were three inter-connected pools, a large greenhouse (with superbly flavoured tomatoes, long curly cucumbers) and a much used potting shed (where the super gardener Burton worked). In addition, would you believe, there was an apple and pear orchard (thirty trees or so) alongside beds for raspberries and asparagus. Picking the apples and storing them in the top of the house in the late autumn was great fun which we had together.

And there is more: he operated a workshop for he was an excellent mechanical engineer. You should have seen how carefully and thoroughly he cut in half an extremely large wasps' nest which he had recently killed by arms-length application of cyanide powder on a teaspoon (immediately deadly to human and all animal life! Then you could buy cyanide over the counter at the local chemist by signing the poison book. Amazing.) It is fantastically interesting how a wasps' nest is built, so intricate are the pathways, so intense they all are, quite intriguing to see all these dead grubs, each in their own allotted place. Really, it was quite gruesome, everything in that vile yellowy white colour! He was so curious to discover how everything worked, particularly anything mechanical. On another occasion, he took to pieces his upright, foot operated grinding machine just to discover how vertical energy (the foot) could be converted to a rotating cutting force (the grindstone). And very clever we both discovered it is too! It was very hard indeed to get it all back into working order, there were millions of ball bearings all dying to race each other onto the dusty floor. Eventually, he did manage it and so gained my undying admiration for his curiosity, skill and tenacity. Seeing is always believing!

The grandchildren loved him and he them. He liked nothing better than to play endless leapfrog with all of them on the front lawn.

There were lots of long white legs, flashing in the air, mixed with brown and blond hair all over the place. And lots of laughter, of course.

A particularly vivid memory for me arose many times when we visited him at Regaby Veg. We drove down the long drive and of course he had been waiting for us. So too had Kate been waiting for him. The second the car door was open she raced to the front door and there he was standing there. He was wearing his usual emerald green cardigan and his arms were wide open, as wide as the smile of welcome on his face. Kate's arms were high up reaching for him. He just scooped her up and they gave each other big hugs. Off they went at once to the summer house in the garden across the lawn – they held on so tightly to each other. There he put her on the rocking horse and they were together. Neither re-appeared until it was time to go again – wonderful.

When we were married, he was simply great with Alison and they quickly established a loving rapport. He was so mindful and supportive of the issues which she was having to face. He gave her a small token of his affection which she still has today.

Sport.

Dad was a superb athlete and also good socially, having a charming manner with whomever he met. He made his opponents feel completely at their ease – then he beat them with professional skill and clear determination! In his earlier years, he played much squash and tennis, Sutton Hardcourts being his home club. In fact, he was a co-founder of the squash club there (now a major venue in the Midlands). He also captained the Warwickshire seconds team for tennis. In his early years of marriage, he also played badminton and rode a horse, both alongside Mother – fine boots they both had too!

He was also a skilled ice hockey player. You should have seen him whizzing over the ice on Powells Pool in Sutton Park. He was just so fast! And he obviously was loving every minute of it.

When I was in my early teens, Dad had a Lillywhite high quality match table tennis table brought up to one of the top rooms of our house (Bryn Teg). Here for many hours, he and I played and played. He was so good but eventually I managed to reach his tremendous standard (or nearly, if I am truthful!), It was here that he wanted to talk to me about the birds and the bees (literally) – you know, a Father’s duty “he’s a boy, you do it, dear” (been there have you?) But I was too embarrassed to let him continue much. My loss, such a shame.

He played golf and bridge on a regular basis over many years. In fact, the quality of his bridge was such that he could play at county level – no mean achievement.

However, for example, in earlier times, when he joined the local golf club, it really was very cliquey. People fixed up their foursomes in advance and played in these same groups every week. As a newcomer in the beginning, this clearly represented a problem, that is, there was no-one available to play with much too often. He found a good solution to this. He let it be known to the steward and to Charlie, the excellent pro, that he would be available to play with anyone at all who walked into the changing room at 1.30 pm on a Saturday. Gradually it became apparent that there were other members who also had no-one with whom to play. Since Dad always insisted that he would play with anyone at all, on a first come first served basis, he soon had met many other members. Others too had also benefitted similarly. That was a popular move indeed.

In his late forties, early fifties, he went shooting in the black mountains in Wales. I accompanied him on many Saturdays. Sometimes we walked the hedgerows but mostly the birds were driven towards us by beaters; they were mainly partridge and pheasant and sometimes a few pigeon. At the end of the day on the ground, there were great piles of the shot birds, all heaped up together. We might regularly take home twelve or so brace in the boot of the car. There were also some snipe and sometimes teal, shot from over certain pools where they had collected in perhaps clouds of a thousand or so. Amazingly, unless you picked one off individually rather than

just shooting into the great mass you could never hit one, and not always even then either.

When we got home, we used to hang the birds for seven to ten days in the cold larder which greatly improved their flavour. When served roasted, they were always accompanied by a fine red wine from his cellar, for he was extremely knowledgeable on burgundies and also on claret, keeping a small specialized cellar.

He was good at drawing and dressing the bird, a process in which I was too nauseated to join him. In fact, I eventually handed over my twelve bore to another member of the family and stopped accompanying Dad on his shoots for I simply could not abide all the wanton killing. I think after another season or two, he followed my example. And indeed, after you have eaten a highly flavoured pheasant for most of the days of the week, a delicacy as it may be, you reach the point when enough is enough and you just have to stop and change your diet.

Fishing

Some days, Dad would take me fresh water fishing, usually to a pool towards Burton. This was well stocked with tench, carp, bream, roach and perch. We would often sit, sometimes for hours in rain, sometimes on the landing stage with the water all so close around. There we just waited....and waited. Down went the groundbait (maggots). We were looking for large carp because we knew that there were many in the pool. We used 4x very light tackle because the carp could see anything more substantial and so kept their distance. This was really insufficiently strong for a fish of the size for which we were hoping, perhaps fifteen to twenty pounds or so, if you were lucky. This meant that any bite had to be played with great care for any excessive strength caused the line to break immediately. Carp are extremely sensitive to what they are willing to eat. Nice wriggly worms are not deemed attractive – no takers arose, not so much as a tickle on the float.

However, Dad dreamed up a fine and successful solution to their fanciful diet. Either we used a strawberry (although it tended to fall off all too soon) or more often we would rub up some white bread into a ball, half a large as the palm of our hand. This we had earlier mixed with honey and it soon became a successful bait not only for the carp but also for the bream. We did not want to hook too many bream because they do not fight very vigourously, even those weighing three pounds or so. In addition, they are horribly slimy when held as they are being transferred to our landing net. We took some of these home and put them into our own pool in the garden. When subsequently viewed with the roach we also took back, they looked very fine all together, since their swimming habit and colour are quite different.

On one occasion (the inevitable time when that large one just got away), I remember a very large rainbow carp, firmly hooked, swam, fast and straight towards us on the landing stage, between our legs and round the stage supports. In a flash it had gone! The thin line had immediately snapped. Fortunately, Dad had more luck on another occasion when he successfully caught an eighteen pound leather carp. This he brought home, had it stuffed and it adorned our library in a glass case for many years – jolly fine it looked too.

And then there was the sea fishing and what a different experience is that to the freshwater variety. As a boy, Dad had fished a lot in Torquay harbour, well before it had become all clogged up with the large yachts and motor boats which are currently there now. Here he had learned to fish using just a line with his two brothers (don't all boys love doing this?). What did they fish for? They fished for tope. And what is a tope? Just a little spratty thing you might think? Or possibly a young flat fish or pollock? No, nothing small and gentle; the boys loved excitement. Tope are a variety of shark. So that's on what he learned. And for why? Because there was his brother Geoff ten miles away who was busily catching blue shark in the outer dart estuary. They all loved it.

Anyway, the sea fishing which he did with me took place while we were on holiday in Criccieth during the war years. Dad had chatted to the hotel's chef and there he was promised that

whatever we brought back, the chef would cook. So they both had a challenge and as a boy of about ten years I just participated with bated breath and great excitement. So one morning, off we went to do our bit. In a motor boat or with some local person managing the boat for us? Not a bit of it – anyway there were no men around in the wartime. Dad got hold of a small rowing boat (six feet long no more), told me to get in and pushed off into the sea. Dad always had great muscley forearms and a chest like a large barrel with a four inch expansion when he breathed. It was like a mill pond and off we went. Easy peasy. Quite soon our view of land had quite disappeared; I felt we were approaching the very end of the world (for it's quite flat as you all know). Luckily for me, Dad decided to drop anchor, literally, before we could fall over the edge (as I thought). We got our rods out and popped them over the edge of the boat. And, boy, it was so deep it seemed to go down for ever and ever. I said, "Dad, we won't go over the edge, will we; I'm frightened." He said, "with me we will both be fine but don't lean over the gunwale too far." So I was very careful about that.

No action for a bit until suddenly my line gave a little pull/pull. So I pulled back, wound in and out came a dab, which I rapidly yanked into the boat. Dad got the hook out of its mouth, re-baited me and over the side it went again. And a number more followed. I was beginning to get bored. Until the next pull/pull. And then my heart leapt into my mouth, as I was very nearly pulled overboard by the force of whatever happened to be on the end of my line. The rod bent double and I felt myself being pulled over the side. Very frightening but Dad immediately reached over, held on to me tightly and told me to wind in. This I did and a tremendous fight ensued between me and the enormous whale I knew I must have hooked. But I was winning and so excited, until at last there was this monster on the surface beside the boat. It was a skate, as round as a large dinner plate, though I had never heard of that until then. But they do fight you every inch of their way to the surface; they come up with their flat side up and when you get them into the boat, if, as I did, you reach out to restrain them, then their scaly poisonous tail lashes over onto the back of your hand. I learned to avoid that pretty quickly. Lucky I had such a good teacher.

After all that back at the hotel, the chef did his bit and that is how I learned the different taste between skate and plaice. They both taste super too, especially when they are just out of the sea. That was such a big adventure for me with my Dad!

Cars

In his late teens, Dad was 'into cars' (even if he did take a short job in an estate agency at this time – but this is where he acquired his interest and deep knowledge about houses, always to serve him in good stead in later life). He would buy and sell an exciting car every two or three months – it was so quick and simple in those days. Mostly these were jazzy two seaters to impress not only himself but of course the girls (although only one individual lady was ever subsequently identified – my Mum!). He was very proud of his Stutz, a superb American auto and somewhere he is photographed with Mum seated beside him. Very thirties they look too.

He only ever had three cars after he settled down a bit. He had each for about ten to twelve years and they were all superb models.

His first was a 1936 grey drop-head three litre Bentley, BXF 436. This was a grand tourer par excellence. When we went on our annual holidays, because there were so many of us, Mother took her car too. This was a dark blue fixed head Bentley, BYN 976. We travelled on open and mostly carless roads in tandem. It made me feel proud. The journeys to Wales or to Devon would take twelve hours or so which was very tiring for all of us.

His second car was a fantastic black projectile, like a torpedo, well ahead of its time, everyone would look at it and comment. This was a Bristol 401, RPG 200. A full four-seater with immaculate leather upholstery and a large boot. So streamlined and well proportioned were its lines that it initially looked like a much smaller car. It also went like a rocket. I remember once, just after he had bought it, he and I were returning from Wales where we had been shooting. The light was falling and the country roads narrow. Along a short straight just ahead was a great thing, pressing to force itself

through the roadside hedge into the narrow road space. It had lots of energy and was very big. Should we stop or go on? Speed and time were not on our side. Dad dropped into second like a flash in a racing gear change, without using the clutch, and we accelerated like lightning past harm's way. We looked back in the mirror and saw an enormous bull, big strong and black! Wow, that really was a close shave!

The third car was a two plus two blue Chrysler sports model – a large car by any standards. This had a 4.7 litre V8 engine and went even faster than the Bristol, if such can be imagined. I remember that his many friends at the golf club were totally mesmerized, when they first spotted it in the car park. It did cost him several rounds of drinks at the bar though, but I know that he thought it was all very well worthwhile.

A Professional in Engineering

Professionally his prime skills were in engineering, machines and metal. He understood all this through and through. Dad had a fine mathematical mind, albeit almost completely untrained. But he thought everything out from scratch for himself, completely. And he didn't make mistakes either, he was careful, thorough and effective. He liked taking his cars to pieces, just to see what was hidden inside. Sometimes though, he would make a repair and this required taking lots of bits out, putting them somewhere, mending whatever it was, and then, this is the hardest part, putting/screwing everything back together again and in the right and reverse order. To help himself do this, he would look at the engine with great care for some minutes until he had completely memorized how everything fitted together. No small feat that – I know for I've tried it myself. You just have to make sure that there are no bits left over when you thought you had put it all together again! Not as easy as you might think.

During the war years, he led a team of fire fighters based in Perry Barr. I well remember him getting a telephone call at midnight (night after night for months on end). He then got up quickly, jumped onto his motorcycle combination and drove off the six miles or so to get him to the fire station. Not least this was less than easy because there was absolutely no street lighting which would give the Germans better visibility with

which to select their targets for their bombs. (I remember that a stick fell quite close to our house one night and that was a very scary experience, although we were all in the newly built air raid shelter which he had had constructed under the house.). Anyway, the team usually had to go over to Coventry, about 25 miles away. It was a little curly road in those days and all in the stygian blackness. The sky would be all lit up in front of them from the intense fires caused by the bombing of the munitions and armaments factories on twenty four hour working, so although it was difficult to see the verges of the road, there was never any doubt about where to go! This process, night after night, finally exhausted Dad and he had a very long spell in bed with a stomach ulcer.

After the war, now recovered, he bought a small specialist engineering factory, just off the inner ring road in Birmingham. This employed about ten highly skilled engineers and was called Forbes. In order to stamp his identity on it he changed its name to Forbes and Shelley. They manufactured machinery which operated to fine mathematical limits. I remember one which Dad showed me - it produced the stampings from which the wooden scoops were made from which one ate ice cream from its tub. I was greatly impressed with this at the time. Eventually, he had to sell to the corporation (cpo) because they wanted the land as a part of their ring road development. So you won't see it now, although I could take you straight to the very place where it used to be.

On another occasion, I had started work at Walsall Conduits and I was sitting in a small office in the machine shop, learning about costing electrical products. To my surprise one morning, I saw Dad walking down the gangway. He passed me by, not knowing I was there, went down to a state of the art automatic capstan machine which had broken down and looked at it with great care. He then took off his overcoat and his jacket and his trilby (did you know that directors always wear a hat so that their authority is immediately visible to all the operators?). He then set about working on its depths and soon, to my utter amazement, it was all working OK again. He then put on his clothes and left! No-one else had the ability to do what he could do and there were other knowledgeable engineers

already in the factory. That was my Dad in action – really great, I felt.

Conclusion

I do hope that other family members will feel pleasure as they read this. Although Dad died over thirty years ago, my memories are sharp, clear and happy. May these words invoke in you other joyful shared experiences of your own in his company.

Of course, I have inherited from him many of his traits and characteristics. I think though that the one I value most for myself is his ability, and now mine, to feel and give our love to others around us. Is not life all about the giving and receiving of love between our family and friends?

Robert Shelley
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